

CREATING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH THE DELIBERATIVE DISCUSSION: A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY DIALOGUE.

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Abstract

When citizens come together to inquire about issues that matter to the community, learning may occur in these temporary learning communities. Active engagement with issues of social and political importance may increase the adult's sense of commitment to action and further the development of a community's social capital. Using a social capital development framework, this case describes one community's attempt to promote and encourage citizens to engage in deliberative discussion. The case also highlights one citizen's struggle to link discourse with community action.

Introduction

When citizens come together to inquire about issues that matter to the community, learning may occur in these temporary learning communities. However, the linkage among community dialogue, learning, and action is not clearly established (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000). Between January and March 2004, over 120 central Ohio residents attended one of seven public forums to discuss the Future of Health Care in the region and in the nation. The evening forums were held in public spaces such as religious institutions, university auditoriums and public libraries at various locations in Columbus Ohio. When working with community groups forming for the purpose of engaging in dialogue what is learned and how does the learning manifest itself in actions. How can adult education practitioners create and sustain an environment at the community level that promotes learning, action and furthers the development of social capital? Adult education practitioners are challenged to encourage the learning that occurs in naturally forming communities and to provide support for it but not to interfere in it or use their expert knowledge to direct the groups (Grisham, 1999). David Mathews (1999), President of the Kettering Foundation, views the creation of a public as a prime task for adult educators.

Through promoting dialogue in a manner, which gives voice to the community, adult educators can help restore citizen involvement in the decisions affecting their national lives. However, little has been studied concerning the ways to promote the deliberative discussion at the community level. Since little is known about this type of learning, researchers can help reveal more about its nature, including its relationship to creating desirable social, civic, and economic outcomes (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000). The purpose of this paper is to explore how one organization, the Council for Public Deliberation, attempted to promote civic engagement at the community level. Using a social capital development framework, this case describes one agency's attempt to promote and encourage citizens to engage in deliberative discussion. The case also highlights one founding member's struggle to link discourse with community action. The data for this report was collected from reports written by community facilitators and an interview with one community organizer. Possible implications for organizing citizen learning communities will also be described.

The Role of Social Capital and Community Dialogue

Social capital is characterized as social connectedness, social interactions, and social networks in which members of a community develop norms for collective action through mutual support for accomplishing goals that enhance community life (Putnam and Goss, 2002). Putnam further describes social capital along the dimension of formal-informal, thick –thin, inward looking to outward looking and bridging vs. bonding. Social capital might be considered as a measure of the health of civil society and by extension the robustness of a democracy.

Spaces and places where adults might gather to discuss ways in which the community might grow can be sites for creating and enhancing the networks and relationships in that community (Wright, 1980). Activity that promotes the community good, that is designed with agreed upon outcomes, that uses existing networks or builds new networks, and that is directed toward issues facing a community might be characterized as learning to develop a community's social capital (Balatti and Falk, 2002). Social capital can be conceptualized as a community resource that builds from group members acquired knowledge, from the networks established through cooperative activity that might include situations designed to promote learning, and from identity resources developed from engaging in social activity such as trust, increased competence, or developing voice (Balatti and Falk, 2002). Group members' engagement with community issues draws upon and creates new social capital. Social capital, according to Nimela (2003), is the ability of citizens to cooperate, to use resources, to create networks, to become engaged with each other and to take responsibility for the issues affecting the community. The degree to which individuals engage with the issues is the degree to which social capital increases. The community forum, a space for structured dialogue around contemporary issues might be described as a form of informal, thin, single encounter, outward looking, concerned with the public good and bridging, bringing together people of diverse backgrounds, social capital. The ways in which participants associated after attending forums, participate in political or other social activities, or form networks might be considered indicators of the influence of the forum on the development of social capital. While Wuthnow (2002) suggests that there is a slight decline in the United States, Mathews (1999) believes that deliberative discussion can assist the public to find its voice and influence civic actions in their communities.

The Community Forum: The Context

The Council for Public Deliberation, Columbus, Ohio, is a voluntary non profit community organization composed of interested citizens holding a common belief in dialogue as the means to promote adult learning and to enhance critical thinking and civic engagement among the citizens of Central Ohio. The council was formed in 1998 and is dedicated to engaging citizens in discussions of issues important to the local community and to the nation. The Council sponsors community forums, works with other community and professional organizations to moderate, frame, record and report on community dialogues (Stein, 2004). As Marion, a community forum organizer and founding member of the Council stated,

We are about creating a space where citizens can engage and talk. We provide a chance for people to talk. We do this because somebody has to in order for our democracy to work. The government can't do it, should not do it. Ordinary people should do it. Forums create the space to allow people to engage and create that feeling of commitment. You can not do that in unstructured conversations.

In Winter 2004 the Council for Public Deliberation attempted to involve a broad cross section of Columbus Ohio residents in a dialogue on the future of health care. Using the Kettering Foundation Model for public deliberation spaces would be created for ordinary people from the community to gather in public spaces to give voice to public issues. The forums were part of a

non-partisan national discussion on health care as part of the Public Voice 2004 campaign. The health care issue was selected by the council for its applicability to the growing problem of the uninsured in Ohio as well as the high cost of health care and its affect on the economy. The council through the reporting mechanism of the forums would provide an opportunity for the citizens of central Ohio to join citizens across the country in expressing their concerns on health care policies.

A Framework for Case Analysis

Stein and Imel (2002) identified the following common characteristics across adult learning groups in a variety of settings: the importance of place, content related to the daily life of the community, knowledge that is locally produced, and the role of power that is not always evident.

The importance of place and time. The results of the forums were disappointing across the seven sites. Participation ranged from three in one site to twenty at another. The average was under ten participants per site. Marion commented on the fault in the design of the forums especially the temporal nature of the event and the lack of truly knowing the adult learners

. . . Unless you have a group that meets together it is hard attract twenty- five participants as a critical mass for the discussion. The participants do not stay to discuss the issues in depth like in a study circle. Each time (forum) it is a completely different group of people. We know so little about the people who come to the forums.

Marion framed the situation as one in which success, in terms of participation is dependent upon building a relationship over time with the various communities that make up the people of central Ohio as well as establishing relationships with those who the people will trust as creating the places where diverse opinions can be expressed and respected. The organization sponsoring the forum needs to be viewed as non-partisan and unbiased with regard to the issue and the intended outcome of the discussion.

The Importance of locally produced knowledge. Considering the notion of social capital as a bridging diverse views and perspectives, the forums failed to achieve that goal and did not produce knowledge representative of the community. Participants were homogenous with regard to supporting health care reform as well as homogenous with regard to socio-economic, cultural, and political perspectives. While all at least three choices regarding health care policy were discussed, the discussions were devoid of legislators, health professionals, advocates for the status quo, and in many instances the medically underserved. Location, time (evenings) and lack publicity has much to do with the lack of diversity. While public spaces such as libraries and churches were used to hold the forums, these public spaces might not have been easily accessible due to transportation requirements, or regarded as welcoming, and required potential participants to cross neighborhood lines. The lack of publicity may have made events seem unimportant or not supported by the community.

The importance of content related to daily life. This factor may have influenced the participation in the forums. While attempts were made to link with the health care associations in the local area to promote the forums, more might have been done to work with neighborhood associations, i.e. to take advantage of existing neighborhood networks as well as the social capital existing in Columbus. While it is a goal to increase social capital through community dialogues, the forums might have used the existing social capital to promote and sustain the forums.

The Importance of the Forum as a source of community power. Does community dialogue make a difference? As a public response to the issue, over one third of the participants thought that more talk is needed and that this talk should be communicated to policy makers. Participants commented on the need to interact more with their elected representatives (CPD website, 2004). An analysis of comments and views expressed by the participants does indicate a wide range of views expressed about the issue and that the opportunity to engage in discourse was enlightening and intellectually stimulating. However the link to individual and collective action was not clearly established. Marion commented on the forums as a transition between learning about an issue and taking action on that issue. The forum serve as a transition between adopting a particular choice and taking action on that choice.

Our impact is to make a report describing what we as citizens are feeling about these issues and what we are doing. It is important to have these forums so that citizens can learn about the issues and make an attempt to be involved and to be more aware. It is not to adopt a particular choice but to appreciate different ideas. The forum provides a framework for friends to come together and talk about serious things in an honest manner. I hope through the forums that people will connect, interact, write letter, contact their representatives and people do. I watched the connections. Some trade phone numbers so they can talk about this after the forum. I would be very comfortable if one person says this is what I believe and I am willing to meet with any of you to pursue this. By doing forums we are just starting the process and hope it continues on its own. Once people start thinking about a situation and realize that no one has the right answer it frees people up.

The link to public action as not been studied by the Council for Public Deliberation. While the Council views itself as starting the process its mission is to promote dialogue and not become involved in partisan actions as a result of the dialogue.

Linking Research and Practice

Communities across the nation are participating in National Issues type forums. Yet little empirical research on the effectiveness of the forms as a change strategy is available. This case demonstrates that agencies interested in promoting dialogue on a community wide basis need to be cognizant of the location, the difficulty in recruiting diverse voices to the forum, and the weak link to community action. The missing element in the forum experience is the ability to sustain the group and to build social capital. Two hours of interaction does not seem sufficient to build the networks and relationships necessary to bring about community action. Forums need a community's social capital to invite participation and interest in discussing social issues. Forums need to contribute to the development of social capital so that citizens can continue the engagement.

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